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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 SHANGHAI 000371

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TAGS: [PHUM](#) [CH](#) [KIRF](#) [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [SOCI](#)
SUBJECT: CHINESE PROTESTANT SEMINARY IN NANJING SLATED FOR
GOVERNMENT-FUNDED EXPANSION

REF: SHANGHAI 360

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REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

¶1. (C) Summary: The Nanjing Union Theological Seminary is on track for a major expansion in facilities and student capacity, according to Dean Reverend Ambroise Aiming Wang. The Seminary's new campus in the Nanjing suburbs, scheduled to open next year, as well as a new cathedral, have both been made possible with substantial Chinese Government support. Wang argues the lack of charismatic leaders in the younger generation of the Protestant hierarchy does not necessarily pose challenges for the future of Christianity in China, as some have forecast. President Bush's visit in August to a Chinese Protestant church and participation in a worship service was an "encouraging" sign of solidarity with believers in China. The visit of U.S. evangelist Franklin Graham earlier this year was largely positive, but Graham's perceived lack of austerity traveling via private plane made a poor impression on many Chinese Christians. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (C) During an August 14 visit to Nanjing, Poloffs met with Reverend Ambroise Aiming Wang, Vice President and Dean of the Nanjing Union Theological Seminary, for views on Christianity in China from the perspective of the Chinese Government-affiliated "official" Protestant church (see reftel).

BACKGROUND

¶3. (C) The Nanjing Union Theological Seminary was founded in 1911 by a U.S. missionary group, with help from the Henry Luce Foundation. Wang reports that the Seminary currently supports 27 faculty members and 180 students, the latter composed of 150 bachelor's and 30 Master's (of Divinity) degree candidates. The Seminary also offers a part-time Master's of Ministry degree to interested senior clergy. Wang observes that half the current student body enters the Seminary having graduated from college, intending either to obtain another bachelor's or a master's degree. This represents a sharp contrast with the situation ten years ago, when most students entered the Seminary after junior high school. Additionally, women constitute two-thirds of the student body and one-third of the Seminary's ministry. In fact, Wang proudly notes, his wife is also a pastor.

¶4. (C) Wang observes that most Seminary students are from rural areas, particularly Henan and Anhui Provinces. Upon graduation,

many return to their hometowns in the countryside to work in local churches. This is an important development, Wang argues, because China is experiencing a shortage of ministers. Wang estimates there are 60 million Protestant believers nationwide but only 2,000 pastors to serve them, most fairly uneducated.

PLANNED EXPANSION

15. (C) Wang reports that the Seminary is currently building a new campus in the Nanjing suburbs, a project expected to expand total enrollment to 1,000 students. The new campus is slated to open next year, although, Wang admits, filling the school to capacity will be a longer term project, perhaps taking 20 years. The Seminary is currently on the lookout for new faculty members to meet the hoped-for student increase. The Seminary's other major project is a new cathedral in Nanjing, also under construction and scheduled for completion in 2010.

16. (C) Wang notes that while China has 23 Protestant seminaries, the Nanjing Seminary benefits from its designation as China's only "national seminary." As a result, the Chinese Government is providing funding for the Seminary's new campus construction, as it is for other "national" religious centers, including a Daoist studies center and an Islamic school, both in Beijing. Hui Liangyu, when he was Party Secretary of Jiangsu Province (1999-2002), helped the Seminary by providing the land for the new campus several years ago (Hui is now a Vice Premier). Wang asserts that the Seminary's relations with China's Religious Affairs Bureau (RAB) are good, noting that the Bureau is generally more interested in policy -- how the Protestant churches operate in China -- than in what a church preaches.

DOCTRINE, NOT CHARISMA

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17. (C) Wang acknowledges that the growing lay movement in the Chinese Protestant church may affect what path it takes as an institution. He disagrees, however, that a lack of well-known, charismatic leaders in the younger generation of the Protestant hierarchy necessarily poses challenges for the future of Christianity in China, as some observers have suggested (see refTel). In fact, Wang asserts, an emphasis on charisma can lead to "dangerous cults of personality." One such sect is the Dongfang Cai, or Eastern Flash Cult, which believes that Jesus has returned as a Chinese woman. The cult is quite popular in rural areas and its adherents sometimes kidnap people, Wang said. Wang is also concerned that some influential fundamentalists have preached that Wenchuan -- an area in Sichuan home to many Chinese ethnic minorities -- was hit particularly hard by the May 12 earthquake as punishment for its not being Christian. Wang concludes the future of Chinese Protestantism lays in a doctrinal, not charismatic, focus. The church must take time to reaffirm its basic principles, putting greater emphasis on theological training.

BUSH, GRAHAM VISITS

18. (C) Wang comments that President Bush's visit, during his Olympic stay in China, to a Protestant church and participation in a worship service was an "encouraging" sign of his solidarity with believers in China. Wang observes that China has a "strong ecclesiastical relationship" with the United States, resulting from the U.S. missionary tradition as well as the influence of the overseas Chinese church. Wang points to the visit of the U.S. evangelist Franklin Graham to China earlier this year as proof of this bond. During his visit, Graham was feted by the RAB in Beijing, after which his delegation traveled to Nanjing, Shanghai, and Hong Kong. Overall, the Graham visit was largely positive, Wang notes, though Graham's perceived lack of austerity in traveling via private plane made a poor impression on many Chinese Christians.

¶9. (C) While he regards the participation of foreign leaders in worship services in Chinese churches as undeniably important and uplifting, Wang argues that such visits are insufficient to create momentum for social change in China. He points to former Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping's push for reform and opening up thirty years ago as the kind of event in China - instigated by a Chinese citizen - that can lead to real social change.

COMMENT

¶10. (C) As a key leader in China's "official" Protestant church, Wang unsurprisingly gives an upbeat assessment of relations with the Chinese Government. Still, Wang seems of the mindset that the most good can simply be achieved in cooperation with, rather than in opposition to, the existing political system. Moreover, Wang's depictions of RAB assistance suggest Beijing is learning to acquiesce to -- and even willing to help facilitate -- those religious activities that are transparent to the state.

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